

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8482

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SUBJ: GOP RETICENT ON ELECTION RETURNS

REF: A. PANAMA 5831, B. PANAMA 5707

SUMMARY: THE GOVERNMENT IS STRANGELY RETICENT ABOUT THE RESULTS OF THE AUGUST 6 ELECTIONS FOR PANAMA'S 505 COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES. ALTHOUGH APPARENTLY LESS THAN HAPPY WITH THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTIONS, THE GOVERNMENT APPEARS TO REMAIN IN FULL CONTROL OF THE SITUATION. VOTER TURN-OUT, SEEN BY GEN. TORRIJOS AS AN INDICATOR OF HIS POPULARITY, IS PLACED AT 83 PERCENT BY THE GOVERNMENT BUT ESTIMATED BY THE OPPOSITION CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY TO BE LESS, ABOUT 70 PERCENT. PRELIMINARY GOVERNMENT FIGURES SHOW TOTAL VOTES CAST TO BE 654,421. A LARGE NUMBER OF ELECTORAL CHALLENGES HAVE BEEN FILED, CITING A VARIETY OF VOTING IRREGULARITIES, BUT WE HAVE NOT YET SEEN HARD EVIDENCE OF GOVERNMENT DUPLICITY IN FRAUDULENT PRACTICES. END SUMMARY.

1. THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN STRANGELY RETICENT ABOUT THE RESULTS OF THE AUGUST 6 ELECTIONS FOR PANAMA'S 505 COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES, THE LOCAL OFFICIALS COMPRISING THE ESSENTIALLY POWERLESS NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. PRELIMINARY
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RESULTS SHOWING VOTER PARTICIPATION BY PROVINCE HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED, THE WINNERS IN INDIVIDUAL CAMPAIGNS HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED, AND CREDENTIALS ARE BEING ISSUED THIS WEEK TO THOSE ELECTED. ACCORDING TO THE ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL, HOWEVER, COMPLETE RESULTS OF THE ELECTIONS, INCLUDING THE BREAK-DOWN OF VOTES AMONG THE DIFFERENT CANDIDATES, WILL NOT BE READY BEFORE THE END OF THIS WEEK.

2. AT THIS POINT, THE GOVERNMENT IS CLAIMING A VOTER TURN-OUT OF 83.1 PERCENT, BUT THAT FIGURE IS DEBATABLE. THE STATISTICS SHOW THAT 654,421 VOTES WERE CAST. USING AUGUST 1977 CENSUS FIGURES, THE GOVERNMENT PLACES THE TOTAL VOTING POPULATION AT 787,251 AND THUS CLAIMS THE 83.1 PERCENT RATE OF VOTER PARTICIPATION. JUST PRIOR TO THE ELECTIONS, HOWEVER, THE GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING GEN. TORRIJOS, SPOKE OF A LARGER ELECTORATE, WITH A TOTAL OF SOME 900,000 OR EVEN A MILLION PEOPLE. PICKING UP ON THAT IDEA, THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY DID A LITTLE ARITHMETIC AND CAME UP WITH WHAT APPEARS TO BE A REASONABLE CALCULATION OF THE TOTAL ELECTORATE AS SOME 940,000. USING THAT FIGURE, THE RATE OF VOTER PARTICIPATION DROPS TO ABOUT 70 PERCENT.

3. IS THE GOVERNMENT HAPPY WITH THE VOTER TURN-OUT? A GOOD QUESTION, SINCE GEN. TORRIJOS SEEMED TO BE LOOKING TO VOTER PARTICIPATION AS AN INDICATOR OF HIS POPULARITY AND OF THE ACCEPTANCE OF HIS REGIME. AFTER THE 97.3 PERCENT PARTICIPATION CLAIMED FOR THE OCTOBER 1977 CANAL TREATY PLEBISCITE, OF COURSE, ALMOST ANYTHING WOULD HAVE BEEN A DISAPPOINTMENT, AND THE GOVERNMENT PROBABLY WAS HOPING FOR SOMETHING IN THE HIGH-EIGHTY TO LOW-NINETY PERCENTILE RANGE. HOWEVER, IF THE TURN-OUT WAS AS LOW AS 70 PERCENT, IT WOULD STILL NOT COMPARE BADLY WITH PARTICIPATION IN PREVIOUS ELECTIONS. ACCORDING TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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STATISTICS COMPILED IN THE PUBLICATION "MEMORIA DEL PLEBISCITO" ("PLEBISCITE RECORD"), VOTER PARTICIPATION IN THE 1972 ELECTIONS WAS 89.2 PERCENT; IN 1968, 60.1 PERCENT; IN 1964, 67.1 PERCENT; IN 1960, 59.2 PERCENT; IN 1956, 79.3 PERCENT; IN 1952, 67.5 PERCENT; AND IN 1948, 70.9 PERCENT. ADMITTEDLY, THIS MAY BE SMALL COMFORT TO TORRIJOS. WE BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT HE IS SUFFERING MORE FROM A BRUISED EGO THAN FROM A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN HIS GOVERNMENT.

4. MEANWHILE, THERE ARE OTHER INDICATIONS THAT THE ELECTIONS WERE NOT ALL THE GOVERNMENT HOPED THEY WOULD BE:
-- THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF HAS BEEN RELATIVELY QUIET ON THE SUBJECT IN GENERAL.

-- AS REPORTED REF B, THE VOTING WENT AWRY BECAUSE OF ERRORS IN VOTER REGISTRATION LISTS.

-- THE REPORTS OF THE OAS OBSERVERS AND UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES ON HAND TO OVERSEE THE ELECTIONS, ALTHOUGH BASICALLY FAVORABLE, WERE NONCOMMITTAL.

-- AS REPORTED REF A, 129 ELECTION CHALLENGES HAVE BEEN

FILED. ALTHOUGH THE ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL REPORTS THAT PERHAPS 70 PERCENT OF THESE WILL BE DISMISSED AS INVALID ON LEGAL TECHNICALITIES, THE LARGE NUMBER OF CHALLENGES PROBABLY INDICATES GREATER DISSATISFACTION WITH THE ELECTORAL PROCESS THAN THE GOVERNMENT ANTICIPATED.

5. THE CHALLENGES FILED CITE A VARIETY OF ELECTORAL IRREGULARITIES. THE FACT THAT VOTING REGULATIONS WERE RELAXED AT THE LAST MINUTE (REF B), ALLOWING PEOPLE TO VOTE EVEN THOUGH THEIR NAMES WERE NOT PROPERLY REGISTERED, COMES UNDER HEAVY FIRE. SOME CANDIDATES CLAIM

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THAT THEIR BALLOTS WERE MISSING OR INCORRECTLY PRINTED. IN SOME CASES, GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES WERE SUPPOSEDLY SENT IN TO CERTAIN COMMUNITIES TO VOTE FOR CERTAIN CANDIDATES WITHOUT PROPER CERTIFICATION (THE LAW ALLOWS GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, INCLUDING NATIONAL GUARDSMEN, TO VOTE OUTSIDE OF THEIR COMMUNITY OF RESIDENCE IF THEIR WORK MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR THEM TO DO OTHERWISE, BUT THEY MUST PRESENT A CERTIFICATE TO THAT EFFECT ISSUED BY THEIR IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR). THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN CHARGES THAT, IN VIOLATION OF THE ELECTORAL REGULATIONS, CANDIDATES CARRIED ON THEIR POLITICKING DURING ELECTION WEEK-END.

6. ANY OF THESE IRREGULARITIES MAY HAVE AFFECTED THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTIONS, AND THE GOVERNMENT, AT SOME LEVEL, MAY HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN THE DELIBERATE MANIPULATION OF ELECTION RESULTS THROUGH SUCH TACTICS. HOWEVER, WE HAVE NOT YET SEEN HARD EVIDENCE OF GOVERNMENT DUPLICITY IN FRAUDULENT ELECTORAL PRACTICES. SOME OF THE IRREGULARITIES PROBABLY WERE MERELY OVERSIGHTS OR CARELESSNESS ON

THE PART OF THE GOVERNMENT -- PARTICULARLY THE ERRORS IN THE REGISTRATION LISTS, WHICH SEEM TO BE A REAL CAUSE OF EMBARRASSMENT.

7. TAKEN ALTOGETHER, THINGS REMAIN PRETTY MUCH THE SAME AFTER THE ELECTIONS AS THEY WERE BEFORE THE ELECTIONS.
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THE SITUATION WAS A BIT FOULED UP, BUT OTHERWISE NORMAL. THE MORE INTERESTING DEVELOPMENTS WILL COME WITH THE MEETING OF THE "HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION", CREATED BY GEN. TORRIJOS TO DISCUSS ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE LEGALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND OTHER POLITICAL REFORMS. ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED TO MEET THIS WEEK, IT WAS POSTPONED UNTIL THE WEEK OF AUGUST 21 DUE TO THE ABSENCE FROM THE COUNTRY OF TWO OF THE GOVERNMENT'S REPRESENTATIVES ON THE COMMISSION, GOVERNMENT ADVISER ROMULO ESCOBAR AND FOREIGN MINISTER GONZALEZ-REVILLA. JORDEN

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